

EPISODE 185

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. Are you looking for an easier way to pitch the right journalists? Head to our website at onepitch.co to sign up for a free account today.

Our guest on the pod today is Dani Kwateng from Teen Vogue. As the executive editor, Dani is doing everything from reviewing budgets to managing the Teen Vogue brand and a whole lot in between. Occasionally, she writes stories about the consumer and lifestyle sector. During the episode, Dani shares the evolution of Teen Vogue over the last two decades, how writers can pitch her concepts and ideas, how exclusives can get funneled to other Conde Nast publications and more. Let's dive in.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:58] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. With us today, oh, right in time for fashion week. We were just talking about this. The season is upon us. We are talking with the executive editor today of Teen Vogue. Dani Kwateng is here with us. How are you feeling, first of all, Dani, just with the season upon you? This is early September, just so everyone knows.

[00:01:22] DK: Overwhelmed, overwhelmed. But we shall make it through. Every year, I'm like I'm going to take it easy with the shows. I'm going to just go to the ones I really want to. Then it's like a weird feeling of like FOMO, plus like, "Damn, maybe I need to check out this new person." Then you end up just like stacking your schedule. So I'm trying to take it easy this year, but we'll see.

[00:01:46] BB: We'll see. We'll see. Well, thank you for being here. First of all, for squeezing this in. This is fantastic. How many years of New York Fashion Week have you gone to, by chance?

[00:01:57] DK: Oh, my God, a decade. Listen, yes, as long as I moved. I moved to New York in 2009, so 14 years. Yes.

[00:02:03] BB: Yes. Dang, dang, dang.

[00:02:05] DK: I know. I haven't gone every single year. Some years. Like last year, I had my son in September, so I missed that year. Some Februaries are hit and miss. Sometimes, it's too damn cold to be outside running to shows. But, yes, it's part of the culture of magazines. So there's always been a little bit of events happening here and there, even if I don't go crazy with it.

[00:02:29] BB: Wonderful. Fashion week, how exciting, how exciting. Okay. Before, and I do ask this of everyone pretty much now, Dani, just to make sure we're emphasizing the right stuff, and everyone is well aware of the outlet, how would you describe what Teen Vogue is today?

[00:02:45] DK: Oh, wow. I love that question. Yes. So our brand started in 2003, so we turned 20 this year. Initially, we were sort of the little sister of Vogue, right? We were the brand that was very conscious about fashion but from a youth perspective, very, very young, right? Our breeders back then were pre-teens and teens. So we were focused on fashion, and beauty, and dating advice, and how to get into your favorite college, and sort of a peripheral view of teenage existence, teenage girl existence.

Then throughout the 20 years, as young people have evolved, we evolved. So now, I would say that we are really focused on identity. We're focused on how political affiliation, beliefs, whether it's gender, identity, or socioeconomic status, how all of these things affect identity and how you show up in the world. Being so comfortable in these spaces and telling the stories of people who are in these spaces and thriving or at least creating safe space for others to thrive.

I would say that's who we are now. It's a beautiful place to be in, and I think what I always tell people is that we're a reflection of our generation, right? We're constantly having to evolve because our audience naturally grows up. So we're a reflection of young people now, and it's exciting time to be at Teen Vogue, for sure.

[00:04:12] BB: What would you classify as that young person because I wonder the demographics of the readership?

[00:04:19] DK: Yes. So people always think it's like back in the day, like it's 12 and 13-year-olds. But actually, our demo is 18 to 26. I would say that person is somebody who is starting a new path, right? So either it's going from high school to college or from college to the adulting years. This is somebody who is conscious of the world around them, conscious of things happening in their neighborhood, but also conscious of global community happenings. This is somebody who deeply cares about making the world better, who wants to be sustainable as possible, who wants to be caring and understanding to different marginalized communities. This is somebody who is empathetic but also active and politically engaged.

So our readers are phenomenal human beings. They are, we believe, the people that are going to change the world, to be quite honest. So I would say that's kind of a snapshot of – I mean, obviously, there's different interests and core cultures and all of that. But I would say that's a general idea of who our reader is.

[00:05:18] BB: Ah, great overview. I am loving it, Dani. I'm like, "Shoot, I should put up the tab and just be reading it myself, even though every day I'm a little out of the demographic, but yes." Okay, Dani, your inbox then. Now, as an editor, that is a little bit different often than reporters, but how is your inbox?

[00:05:39] DK: Oh, my gosh. My inbox is a lot. So I was a reporter, a writer, editor, all that. So because of my me coming up from the ranks, I get a mix of all of it, right? I still get pitches like I'm an editor. I still get asked to cover things like I'm a writer. Then I also get executive editor emails about business happenings, P&L, management stuff, staffing, all of that management exec stuff that's expected with the role.

My inbox is a little bit of a circus, but I would say my – the best way to describe what I do is a traffic controller, and I point everybody in the right direction to go to get what they need at Teen Vogue. A lot of times, it's not for me. Like not every pitch is for me. Most pitches actually are not for me.

[00:06:25] **BB:** Yes, I was going to say.

[00:06:26] **DK:** Yes, which we'll get into. But I am a traffic controller because my inbox looks so crazy.

[00:06:32] **BB:** Got it. Then are you traffic controlling to zero? Are you a let-it-ride person? Are you all the planes hitting each other? Or is it like – how is it?

[00:06:44] **DK:** I would say it's smooth sailing. We're JFK over here.

[00:06:48] **BB:** Nice. Strong, strong.

[00:06:51] **DK:** I mean, I'm saying this like I know JFK is strong. I hope they are but –

[00:06:54] **BB:** I think it is. I don't know either.

[00:06:55] **DK:** I think it is. I'm not sure. But, yes, I mean, I think at this point, I can pretty much read from a subject line or at least the first couple of sentences what the email is about and who it needs to go to or if I need to address it. I also know a red flag email, right, and a writer who's assigned something. An editor can't deal with it and needs backup. I know when to jump in or when something can wait a day or two. So, yes, like I said, the beauty of my job is that I've been everything. So I know how to address most things that drop into my lap.

[00:07:29] **BB:** Okay. You said a red flag email. What is that to you?

[00:07:33] **DK:** Oh. A red flag email is a writer having an issue with a story in the way that we edited it or in something that went live that they take issue with. Maybe they didn't like the way it was edited. So that is a red flaggy moment. Another red flag is just PR crisis, which we have a beautiful amazing comms team to deal with. But any sort of PR crises that come up, that's red flag. I think that's about it. We don't – I mean, Conde is a huge company, so there's folks to deal with everything.

[00:08:06] **BB:** That's so nice.

[00:08:07] DK: I know. I know. I know that it's privilege. There's privilege. I know.

[00:08:11] BB: It's lovely, though.

[00:08:13] DK: But we do. We have an amazing structure at Conde, so there is folks to deal with legal issues or finance issues or comms issues. Like I said, the traffic controller, I need to make sure the right people are involved for whatever the issue is.

[00:08:27] BB: Okay. How about your favorite pitches? Do you ever get something where you're like, "Dang, that's just the perfect pitch." Like that is, "Thank you, person."

[00:08:36] DK: Ah, yes.

[00:08:37] BB: From a writer, maybe it's a journalist or a publicist. What do those look like?

[00:08:42] DK: I mean, because I'm a writer, I have a soft spot for writers. I'm not going to lie. But I'll tell you both. So from writers, I love pitches that are concise, to the point, not long-winded, and they're unpacking or pitching a concept or an idea that's in the zeitgeist that people are talking about but from a really interesting and in-depth perspective. So it could be maybe this week on top of brain is like Kylie and Timothee Chalamet dating, right? You could do a – play a news post about it. Or maybe it's a deeper piece on the Jenner celebrity relationships and why they're together and the elevation of certain people when they date in that family. I don't know. Maybe you find something interesting in that space to pitch a story.

I love like the deeper dives of just like cultural happenings, right? I love that from writers. When it's timely, love it. Then from PR folks, I love experiential pitches. I love when they're like, "Try this, or come join us." I love that. I love when a beauty brand is like, "We have a new skin cream that does this at the other. We'll send you it, and then we'll have a dermatologist sit on the Zoom with you and talk you through it, right?" Or if it's like an experiential like, "Come into this space and get a treatment and see how we're doing this new type of spa treatment or something." I love when I can actually try the product or the experience.

[00:10:11] **BB:** Yes. You're the first one who's coined at least on this show experiential.

[00:10:15] **DK:** Yes.

[00:10:15] **BB:** Like meaning with experience.

[00:10:18] **DK:** I do. I love it. I think most editors do. We want to get out of the office. Come on.

[00:10:23] **BB:** Yes. I just haven't heard it in that great way, so, okay, very good. Oh, now what about exclusives or embargoes? Is that something you're ever interested in, and how would you discern between those two?

[00:10:36] **DK:** Yes. So exclusive and embargoes are great. I like them when they make sense for us. Sometimes, because it's Conde, if it doesn't make sense for Teen Vogue, we might pass it to another brand. But exclusives are essentially information that is not out to the public yet being offered to us by a publicist or a writer. I actually prefer those from a publicist because a writer, it's like, "How did you get this contact?" Sometimes, it's like, "Is it a friend? How did you get this information?" Versus a publicist is representing the person that has the news, right?

It's basically the opportunity for us as an outlet to scoop other outlets by sharing that news first. Having exclusivity rights over that, either it's – sometimes, it's 24 hours where no other outlet is allowed to touch it for a certain amount of time or its first reporting exclusivity. But I love those, again, when it makes sense for us.

Embargoes are when you have information like even an album, right? You have access to an album that hasn't come out yet or a film that hasn't come out yet or just information about maybe a project happening in collaboration or whatever. You can't share it until a certain time. You being the outlet and other outlets, you're under the impression as a journalist that other outlets have the same information, and we're all holding on to this until a certain date and time when we can announce. We can write it up as news.

[00:11:55] **BB:** Okay. Do you find people get this confused?

[00:11:59] DK: I can see that. I think, I mean, yes. Our team is pretty knowledgeable about it. But I can see how folks maybe can get it confused.

[00:12:07] BB: Well, more so from like the publicist side of like, “Hey, I have an exclusive. By the way, I already pitched it to six other people.” Okay. So that's what we've heard on this show before. But I kind of wonder, Dani, if you're like such big league that people are not pulling these shenanigans.

[00:12:23] DK: I love it, Beck.

[00:12:23] BB: I mean that in a flattering – like seriously. They're like, “Shit, we're not playing around.”

[00:12:28] DK: Yes. No, it doesn't happen with us a lot. It doesn't. Sometimes, we have to double-check, right? It doesn't. It's not to toot our horn, but I don't remember the last time it's happened.

[00:12:39] BB: Wow.

[00:12:40] DK: Well, I mean, there have been times where we've said like for covers, like are we the only person who's giving this person a cover for a certain amount of time before or after, right? Are they doing any press before us or after us? Sometimes, they're like, yes, they did this cover that's coming out the month before you. Or, yes, they have this interview that's coming out a week after the month you want to go live with this.

I would say, for the most part, publicists are pretty honest about it because, one, they understand the importance of that moment for their client. Two, it's a relationship. You don't want to lie to an editor about having exclusive on something that they don't have, and then you've marred a relationship. So I think people coming to us know the difference between the two and pretty much, for the most part, abide by those rules.

[00:13:26] BB: Yes. I want to say you're in a stratosphere where now people are – the shenanigans are not happening there. So that is great to hear at this level.

[BREAK]

[00:13:38] ANNOUNCER: Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to learn about the unique ways OnePitch helps brands engage with the right journalists? Head to onepitch.co and create your own custom media list in five minutes or less. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:14:01] BB: Okay, Dani. Speaking of at this level, how does anyone make a relationship with you?

[00:14:08] DK: With me. With me, it's harder.

[00:14:11] BB: Yes. I was going to say.

[00:14:14] DK: With me, it's harder. So let me first break down what I do exactly. So as the Executive Editor of Teen Vogue, I'm essentially a lot of things. But I am the connector. I'm the connective tissue of the brand. So I know what's going on from every single department; editorial, audience development, comms. Well, comms is publicity, sales, everything. I am the person that if editorial wants to maybe pitch something to be sold, I connect them with the sales team or if audience development, which is essentially like social media, traffic, counting in the UVs, and all of that.

If they have something that they need to express to the editorial team about SEO or something like that, I make sure that they do that in a way that makes sense. I know the timetable of the calendar, what we have going on now and in the future, and what we've done in the past. I'm managing all of the different sort of spaces so that we can all flow accordingly. So in that role, I don't really have a lot of space for new relationships because I'm really making sure that my team and the greater relationship with Conde is seamless.

So the external relationships are pretty much the ones I've already built from my background as a culture and style writer and editor. So the relationships I've built for those 14 years, those friends, those publicists will maybe say, "Oh, I have a new artist," and I'll connect them with the editorial team. But I am not so much in the mix where I'm necessarily the person that you need to like corner. I say that because a lot of people always want to approach me first or go straight to the top, right? They always want to talk to the managing editor or the executive editor or the editor-in-chief because they have the most power.

Yes. In a lot of ways, we do have a lot of power, but that doesn't necessarily mean we're the best person to talk to. I think that the best advice I give to young journalists and even publicists is create community within your groups, like great community within your generation or your colleague space. Make those strong, and they will essentially get you into the spaces you want from the level that makes most sense. So for instance, if you have a pitch as a publicist that you want to get your artist into Teen Vogue, instead of coming to me as the executive editor who's busy like juggling all these new things, you should go to the culture editor who knows day to day what's happening with their section, is already thinking of new artists, is already going to shows all the time, is already listening to new music. Talk to them about it to forge your relationships so that whenever you have an artist, whether it's the one you want to pitch or others in the future, they are your go-to to get it on the site.

[00:17:07] BB: This is an avant-garde advice piece I'd say, Dani, and I love it. Basically, I'm too up here. Don't talk to me.

[00:17:18] DK: Oh, I hate that. No.

[00:17:21] BB: But in a productive way because if you really want to get some stuff done, be on with the people who are doing the day-to-day.

[00:17:28] DK: Yes. Because here's the thing, Beck. The thing about it is that I know what's going on from a top-level perspective. But I am not the culture editor, so I am not intensely thinking about how to make my section dope. I'm not thinking about what I want to do next year as a culture editor. I'm presenting it to me as the executive editor, but I am not. So if you want to get something that's culture-related or politics-related or style and beauty-related, talk to the

person who's in it because I as executive editor don't know if they're already planning it. I can't say yes to your pitch if I don't know if they're working on the exact same story with another writer or another publicist.

So it's not even effective to really talk to me. I love building relationships to give advice. But, I mean, in terms of getting into the industry or fostering relationships that will get you stories, that's the editorial team. It's not really me as much.

[00:18:20] BB: Yes. I hope people listen to this. This is gold. I feel bad a little bit, but it's the truth.

[00:18:25] BB: No. Really now, it's true. You know what? My little analogy is, and not that I have any whereabouts of like the White House or whatever, but like don't go to the president when you need to go to like the head of the homeland security.

[00:18:37] DK: Right, that's it. It's not a – it doesn't come from a place of just like a superiority. It's just literally how management works.

[00:18:45] BB: Yes, exactly.

[00:18:47] DK: It just does. Because if you think about it, it really doesn't make sense to ask me, "Oh, can you –" Here's a pitch for this, I don't know, beauty brand. Cool, I can pass this to the style team and see if they're working on anything. They may already know about this, and they already have something in the works. But you know what I mean? I'm just not in the weeds like that to make that call. I don't want to step on their toes.

[00:19:07] BB: Exactly. They're running their **[inaudible 00:19:09]** over there. Okay, Dani, I have a rapid-fire question part, and you just give us your answer point blank. Sound good?

[00:19:17] DK: I'm ready.

[00:19:18] BB: Here we go. Video or phone interview?

[00:19:21] DK: Video.

[00:19:21] BB: Bullet points or paragraphs in pitches?

[00:19:24] DK: Paragraphs.

[00:19:25] BB: Paragraphs. Why?

[00:19:27] DK: I was tempted to say bullet points, bullet points. But I like paragraphs because it feels a little bit more conversational. I think if I saw a pitch from a publicist that was bullet-pointed, I will still be interested, but it doesn't feel as – it feels like maybe like statistics. It feels like not as – it feels very formal, and I like it to feel a little –

[00:19:47] BB: Cold.

[00:19:48] DK: Yes, it's cold. That's a good way to put it.

[00:19:50] BB: Okay. Another avant-garde answer I'd say, Dani. People are like, "Bullet points." Okay.

[00:19:55] DK: All right. How short or long for pitches?

[00:19:58] BB: Oh, I'm short always.

[00:19:59] BB: Short, short. Images attached or Dropbox zip files?

[00:20:04] DK: For a publicist, probably attached.

[00:20:07] BB: Okay.

[00:20:07] DK: Yes, attached, attached.

[00:20:09] BB: Email or Twitter DM or X, whatever now the thing's called?

[00:20:13] **DK:** A hundred percent, a thousand percent, a billion percent email. Do not DM me ever. Please, stop.

[00:20:19] **BB:** Okay.

[00:20:20] **DK:** Don't do it.

[00:20:20] **BB:** Exactly. One follow-up or multiple?

[00:20:23] **DK:** One.

[00:20:24] **BB:** One. Okay.

[00:20:25] **DK:** Yes. You know why? Can I just say this?

[00:20:27] **BB:** Yes, please. This is the safe space to say, yes.

[00:20:30] **DK:** Be proud of what you have. If you're pitching me, it should be something that is really fucking cool. So if I'm not interested, move on. Somebody else will be. If it's something you feel like you have to push, then maybe it's not something you should – that's not great of a story.

[00:20:30] **BB:** Yes, good point.

[00:20:45] **DK:** Right?

[00:20:46] **BB:** Brilliant points here. Okay. Direct or creative subject lines?

[00:20:51] **DK:** Creative.

[00:20:52] **BB:** Creative. Okay. Oh, why? No one's ever said creative I don't think.

[00:20:57] **DK:** Creative but she better be good, Beck.

[00:21:00] **BB:** There you go.

[00:21:01] **DK:** Give me – yes. Don't give me no creatives. The subject line and the inside is like mess.

[00:21:06] **BB:** Fake news.

[00:21:06] **DK:** Fake news. Because the inbox is boring, so sometimes like having a fun little like pitch. Always put the word pitch and then a colon. But if after the colon you want to have fun, sure. But the inside better be good.

[00:21:18] **BB:** Okay. I like it. What time do you normally read pitches?

[00:21:23] **DK:** In the morning. I mean, yes, the morning is it. Yes. Don't send me something on Friday at like 3pm. Come on now.

[00:21:29] **BB:** No. Press release or media kit?

[00:21:32] **DK:** Press release.

[00:21:32] **BB:** Press release. Okay. Lastly, Dani, is there anything that you want to highlight, celebrate, high-five, shout out, et cetera? You, obviously, I know, see the conference you have coming up in November, for example.

[00:21:47] **DK:** Yes.

[00:21:48] **BB:** Maybe that's something you want to plug. This is your time to plug yourself because we want to support our journalist.

[00:21:53] **DK:** This is my time to shine, so.

[00:21:55] BB: Yes.

[00:21:56] DK: Two things. One, you mentioned our summit, our annual summit in November. We're really excited. We are celebrating 20 years, like I mentioned, of Teen Vogue, and we have some really cool things lined up. I can't say what but 20 years of Teen Vogue, so really excited about that. That will be in LA in mid-November. Look out for more information on that on the website.

But it is always a good – it's always – so it is so fun because it's our pretty much – it's our only or one of our few occasions to meet our readers in person. Editors meet readers and young people who are just excited about the brand. They tell us our favorite pieces they've read throughout the year. It's just a great like moment for everyone involved. So summit is a big thing. Please come if you can.

Then the second thing is the Africa Rising package, which I worked on this July. Yes. That was kind of my baby this year. That was my big editorial moment. As I was saying, I don't get a lot of time to sort of be in it with pitches and with stories sometimes. Not as much as I want to. But the Africa Rising package was a really cool package that actually spun out of a pitch, that stylist who –

[00:23:03] BB: Oh.

[00:23:03] DK: Yes, I know. Yes. So –

[00:23:05] BB: Hey.

[00:23:07] DK: A stylist who we work with had come to us early in the year, like January, February, and was like, “I have an idea for a cover story where we shoot three or four different artists in Nigeria.” It evolved because I'm Ghanaian American. So it evolved into let's do something on the continent as a whole because Africa is the youngest continent in the world demographically.

[00:23:31] BB: It is. God, and I'm reading your piece on the traveling to Senegal. This is like the 17th time I swear I have seen something about Senegal.

[00:23:40] DK: Go. Dakar is amazing.

[00:23:42] BB: I need to. I haven't been on the west side over there, so yes.

[00:23:47] DK: Oh, yes, yes. Dakar is amazing. Yes. So we made it a bigger package. It was the three covers, but then it was also a package about eight stories dedicated to youth perspectives on the continent, and it covered everything from US military involvement with coups to 54 designers from each and every country that you should know. It was a labor of love for me. It was my love letter to the continent. It was just a really cool way to highlight young experiences in a place that typically is covered incorrectly or very generalized.

Again, like I said, it came out of one single pitch that grew into more. But please, if you can, check it out.

[00:24:31] BB: Look at that, publicists. That could be you, a whole cover spread and feature. Look at this.

[00:24:38] DK: I know.

[00:24:40] BB: In our dreams, in our dreams. But I love this. It's leaving us with a dream. Dani, thank you so much for being on today. This was truly, truly a treat. I also can't believe you're here right before all the fashion week stuff, so high five to getting it all done.

[00:24:56] DK: Thank you so much for having me. This was so fun.

[00:24:58] BB: So fun. Thanks, Dani. Appreciate you.

[00:25:00] DK: No problem.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:25:02] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode, featuring Dani Kwateng from Teen Vogue. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at onepitch.co/podcast. We'll see you next week with even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

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